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Colby Lectures Us On Need for Stealth

Two weeks to the day after the assassination report was published, CIA Director William E. Colby was standing in a public place, boldly speaking for "all of us."

Colby discoursed confidently on what "we Americans" should do to restore the agency he loves to the image he has of it as a force for peace, freedom and democracy in the world.

Colby was the star of a panel on intelligence at the "Pacem in Terris Convocation." The great champion of covert activities was reaping the rewards of openness. His agency's plight has made him a celebrity. He was stormily applauded during the session and afterwards besieged by autograph seekers. In America, to be a celebrity is to be forgiven everything.

He had friends on the platform, too. Frank Church, chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, could not bring himself to advocate the banning of all covert activity. He could think of justifiable instances, said Church, who was on the point of conducting hearings on Chile, which is generally regarded as the most repulsive of these secret interventions. He also is about to become a candidate for the presidency and apparently does not want to be thought rash.

SEN. CLAIBORNE PELL, D-R.I., who suffers from an abiding anxiety not to offend anyone, said that he thought the congressional investigations of the intelligence services, while "entirely proper" and "long overdue," should be terminated.

Ray Cline, a former CIA official, said, he, too, favored covert operations. He went on to destroy his stand by telling of his disapproval of the secret war in Laos, the Bay of Pigs and the misbegotten Chile operation.

As Colby had depicted the CIA as an enclave of efficient elves toiling for peace, Cline pictured it as a kind of university, where scholars diligently studied and sifted information to put at the disposal of presidents.

Pell marveled at the presence of our CIA director right out in public. Only in America, he breathed.

This prompted Charles Morgan of the ACLU, the angry man on the panel, to growl that the only reason Colby was present was because of the horrendous revelations about his agency.

Colby serenely defended everything: the operation in Laos, the Chilean intervention.

THE MENTION OF Chile brought forth from Church a denunciation so impassioned it should have caused him to rescind his previous advocacy of any covert action.

"The Western hemisphere is not a colony of the U.S.," he cried. "It is not the right of the U.S. to decide what kind of governments they should have. We once knew that. We once practiced that. Those were the days when we were the most respected country in the world. Let us get back to that."

But he was tempted, obviously, by the thought of covert activity in Portugal, the one subject on which Colby had nothing to say. One panel member, Morton Halperin, a former NSC official who was tapped by Henry Kissinger, suggested that we do it openly.

But Church dismissed that possibility. Although public opinion would support it and Portugal plainly does not want to become Communist, we cannot show our hand.

AND WHY CAN'T WE? For the simple reason that CIA covert activity has so weakened our moral leadership that our open intervention would spell the destruction of the forces we want to help.

That's what the CIA has done to America. We can only do good by stealth. We are reduced to covert activity because of what covert activity has done to our good name.

That's why Colby is sitting in the catbird seat. That's why he dares to speak for the American people and lecture Congress and blame its negligence for the CIA's "few mistakes." And why he can say that what this country needs is a law punishing former agents for finking on "the company."